

EDITORIALS

# Off-roading may be banned at Oceano Dunes. Would SLO County's economy survive?

BY THE TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

FEBRUARY 24, 2021 05:30 AM, UPDATED FEBRUARY 24, 2021 07:55 AM



A small group gathered to listen to speeches while others rode bikes, built sand castles and walked along the beach at the Oceano Dunes SRVA on the last day before the park reopened to vehicles. BY [DAVID MIDDLECAMP](#)



Listen to this article now

05:41

Powered by [Trinity Audio](#)

Once again, the popular Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area is in jeopardy.

The state Coastal Commission staff recommends closing the entire 3,500-acre park to off-road vehicles within five years to protect the sensitive dunes environment — which includes several rare and endangered species — and to curb dust pollution that's been endangering the health of downwind residents.

That's triggered worries about the local economy, especially in small communities like Oceano and Grover Beach, where ATV rental shops, service stations and restaurants rack up big sales to off-road enthusiasts from throughout the state, especially the Central Valley.

Chambers of Commerce refer to the Dunes as a "significant economic driver."

"Visitors and locals have been enjoying the beach in their vehicles since the turn of the last century and a specific economy has formed around this activity," local chambers wrote in a joint letter to the state Coastal Commission.

Yet we really don't have a good handle on whether or not the economy would survive — and past studies have not provided much clarity.

An [economic analysis](#) commissioned by State Parks in 2017 determined the OHV park contributed \$243 million to the local economy in 2016-17 and supported 3,330 jobs — and that's been taken as gospel in some quarters ever since.

But serious doubts have been cast on the accuracy of that report by SMG Consulting, so much so that the Coastal Commission asked Philip King, an economics professor at San Francisco State University, [to review it](#).

He was not impressed.

"Unfortunately, in my expert opinion, this report is inadequate for the task of providing policymakers and stakeholders meaning(ful) guidance ..." he wrote.

Problems include a possible "significant arithmetical error ... though given the paucity of discussion and lack of availability of the raw data, it is impossible to tell if it is a mistake or just poorly explained."

SMG representative Carl Ribaud said he had not seen the specifics about the math claim and therefore, could not comment.

King also says it's incorrect to assume that if the off-road park closed, the county would lose out on approximately \$250 million in annual revenue. It's highly likely that other visitors would travel to the area, and might generate even more revenue than off-roaders, many of whom prefer camping and preparing their own meals over staying in local hotels and eating out.

“The most reasonable assumption for an economic impact analysis, is that the empty campsites, hotel rooms, and short-term rentals will be filled by other visitors,” King wrote.

He concluded that there would be limited long-term impacts to the local economy if the off-road riding area were to close.

That same finding was reached by Pratish Patel, an associate professor of finance at Cal Poly, who took a different tack. He looked at information, including bed tax and credit card data, during a six-month period when camping and off-roading were banned due to a combination of COVID-19 and the snowy plover nesting season.

He found the closure had “[no significant impact](#)” on the county’s economy and, in fact, bed tax revenue actually increased in Oceano when compared to the previous year.

### **MORE ANALYSIS NEEDED**

Patel’s report also drew criticism.

One argument: Looking only at bed tax generated in Oceano was misleading. There’s a limited number of hotel rooms and vacation rentals in Oceano, and many out-of-town visitors opt to stay in nearby cities. It would have been more accurate to look at bed tax in the entire region.

Beyond that, there were serious concerns about basing conclusions on data collected during such an atypical time.

“Much of the tourism business in SLO CAL in 2020 was non-traditional and likely not to occur in the years ahead,” Chuck Davison, president and CEO of Visit SLO CAL, said in an email. “What do I mean by that? Well, with theme parks, cruises, international travel and most of the big metro cities across California and the U.S. shut down, those who wanted to travel had limited or different destinations to choose than in normal times.”

[Visit SLO CAL](#), a nonprofit countywide marketing and management organization, plans to hire a consultant to do a comprehensive economic study that will provide answers to key questions, including: What would happen to the local economy if the park banned all off-roading? Would other types of tourism fill the void? What if off-roading were phased out but beach camping was still allowed? Or what if some off-roading were still allowed, but to a lesser degree?

Finally, we may have a definitive study by a disinterested third party. It can't come too soon, given the important decisions that are coming.

## **FUTURE OF OCEANO DUNES**

Major changes could be looming for the Dunes, ranging from complete closure of the SVRA to a big expansion.

We could get a sense of what the future holds at a [March 18 Coastal Commission](#) meeting, when State Parks presents its controversial Public Works Plan.

That plan proposes a major expansion to the south that would include a visitor center, an RV campground, cabins, a motocross track and other visitor-serving facilities.

Coastal Commission staff recommends going in a completely different direction that includes eliminating off-highway vehicle use over five years; closing the Pier Avenue entrance to vehicles; and making “a series of changes to protect natural resources in the park.”

The off-roading community — along with some public officials — will no doubt argue that the South County economy will be ruined if the off-road park closes.

They will likely trot out the \$243 million-a-year-in-lost revenue statistic.

That's a scare tactic.

The notion that South County is totally dependent on off-roading is just wrong, and it doesn't take a financial study to figure that out.

The region has a lot going for it, including beaches and parks, wineries and breweries, restaurants, hiking and biking trails, theaters and museums.

There are some good arguments for maintaining some level of off-road recreation at the Oceano Dunes — if it can be done without harming the environment or public health.

But it's past time to let go of the idea that South County's economy would wither and die without the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.

### **RELATED STORIES FROM SAN LUIS OBISPO TRIBUNE**

ENVIRONMENT

Coastal Commission largely opposes

POLITICS-GOVERNMENT

California parks plan would turn

## Oceano Dunes plan, wants off-roading gone in 5 years

FEBRUARY 18, 2021 5:05 AM

ENVIRONMENT

Off-road riding at Oceano Dunes has ‘no significant impact’ on SLO County economy, study says

FEBRUARY 01, 2021 6:59 PM

## refinery land into a coastal off-road playground

FEBRUARY 14, 2021 8:48 AM

LOCAL

Oceano Dunes is reopening to some vehicles after COVID-19 closure. Here’s when

OCTOBER 20, 2020 4:36 PM



The future of off-roading in the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area is once again up in the air.  
LAURA DICKINSON [LDICKINSON@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM](mailto:LDICKINSON@THETRIBUNENEWS.COM)

 [COMMENTS](#) 

EDITORIALS

READ NEXT

TRENDING STORIES

This SLO County beach is one of the

# Texas, you just got punked by Mother Nature. Californians know climate change is real

BY THE FRESNO BEE EDITORIAL BOARD  
FEBRUARY 19, 2021 10:12 AM

Californians, don't get smug. Summer heat is not far off. | OPINION

**KEEP READING →**

top 25 in the country, TripAdvisor says

UPDATED FEBRUARY 23, 2021 06:00 PM

Former Morro Bay teacher charged with having unlawful sex with a minor, faces 3 felonies

UPDATED FEBRUARY 23, 2021 12:12 PM

SLO County to roll out new lottery for coronavirus vaccines. Here's how it works

UPDATED 10 HOURS 32 MINUTES AGO

Burglars strike 3 SLO County businesses in 2 hours. Police say crimes may be connected

FEBRUARY 24, 2021 2:01 PM

SLO County adds 42 new coronavirus cases, 1 death as daily totals continue to fall

FEBRUARY 23, 2021 1:49 PM

EDITORIALS

Video shows irate driver hitting SLO protester — but it's the driver who's the victim?

FEBRUARY 19, 2021 5:30 AM

EDITORIALS

SLO County board banned polystyrene. Should a gang of bullies be allowed to undo it?

UPDATED FEBRUARY 24, 2021 08:01 AM

EDITORIALS

We can forgive a maskless wedding. It's Rep. McCarthy's holier-than-thou attitude we can't stomach

FEBRUARY 12, 2021 5:30 AM

EDITORIALS

🔒 Two SLO County supervisors want to give COVID violators a break — even as cases keep rising

UPDATED FEBRUARY 11, 2021 10:11 AM

EDITORIALS

Someone knows who sprayed a

EDITORIALS

Anyone will be allowed to run for

## swastika on Cal Poly's Jewish fraternity. Reveal them

UPDATED FEBRUARY 09, 2021 11:21 AM

## sheriff in SLO County — if the state drops eligibility rules

UPDATED FEBRUARY 08, 2021 08:55 AM

### SUBSCRIPTIONS

[Start a Subscription](#)

[Customer Service](#)

[eEdition](#)

[Vacation Hold](#)

[Pay Your Bill](#)

### LEARN MORE

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[News in Education](#)

[Archives](#)

### ADVERTISING

[Place a Classified Ad](#)

[Advertise with Us](#)

[Public Notices](#)

[COPYRIGHT](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION](#)

[TERMS OF SERVICE](#)